Inter-Dimensional Hume and The Modal Logicians: A Trans-World Collision in One Possible World

Prologue: A Glitch in the Space-Time Continuum

There is no consensus on exactly how David Hume arrived in the twenty-first century due to the lack of empirical evidence, and the uncertainty that causation is even a thing that happens. Some say it was an act of God. They say it quietly, so Hume won't hear them. They theorise it to have been a playful rebuke from our creator, feigning offence yet omni-amused by Hume's suggestion that the world might be the experimental handiwork of an infant or elderly deity, or one who did not survive the process. A bespoke act of divine retribution, reserved for atheists perceptive enough to catch the humour. Those in the know understand that he slipped through a trans-world portal, a hole in the space-time continuum, caused by a graduate student casually proposing that, since this very event was a conceivable scenario, it was a possible one, with the logical conclusion that it became actual. Others claim he simply woke up here after a particularly strong whisky. Whatever the cause, the effect was the same: David Hume, patron saint of empiricism, materialises in the middle of a modern analytic philosophy conference. A conference on modal logic. He is not happy.

Inter-dimensional Hume: Origin Story

The graduate student in question approaches, bristling with academically reserved excitement. "Professor Hume! I knew you would come. I knew it! Conceivability does track actuality — we were right all along. Professor Williamson was wrong. I told him he was. He wouldn't believe me!"

Hume reserves judgement. His senses receive the data, but he has no idea what is happening on the other side of his perception.

"Professor, we were just discussing whether, in some possible world, water is not H_2O. Can you shed any light on the matter?" Hume blinks gently, as if trying to decide whether the young man is real or simply an unusually articulate hallucination. "You are asking," he says slowly, "whether, in a world where the properties of water differ entirely, it is still water?" "Yes," the student beams. "So is it? Is it a metaphysical necessity?" Hume looks around the room, realising this was said without irony. "My dear fellow, if I met a substance with other properties, I should call it something else. That is how language works." The student scribbles frantically: 'Hume confirmation: in all metaphysically possible worlds, water = H_2O'. He pauses briefly, and then adds the date. Hume sighs and looks around for a bar or a billiard table, wishing he had brought his rose-coloured Turkish cap — the one that signals to the world: I was trying to relax.

First Contact: The Modal Logicians

Some nearby modal logicians have been listening in. The wig was something of a giveaway, but now they recognise the face, and the accent rings true: Scottish, formal, unmistakably eighteenth century. A small academic scuffle breaks out — or at least as close as academics ever come to scuffling, consisting mostly of subtle posture changes and the occasional assertive elbow. They shuffle forward, each trying to position himself nearest to the great empiricist before anyone else can claim the honour.

“Transworld identity,” says one, breathless with enthusiasm. “S5 logic,” declares another, as if announcing a hereditary title. “A posteriori necessity,” murmurs a third, hoping it will sound impressive enough to secure eye contact. Another mentions philosophical zombies.

This one grabs Hume’s attention. “Ah, so you are a novelist. You’re imagining a world where the living dead contemplate Socrates. Fascinating. Is it a comedy?”

“Absolutely not!” says the logician. “It is serious philosophy — a thought experiment that postulates the existence of philosophical zombies, beings like us in every way and yet with brains that produce no inner experience.”

Hume considers this. “So you mean like us, except possessing brains that are different, in that they don’t produce conscious awareness?”

The logician looks disappointed. He had assumed the great David Hume would be more perceptive. “No,” he says, with the solemn authority of someone describing their favourite and very niche hobby. “That’s the clever part. Their brains are identical, and yet they have no consciousness. It means consciousness is something that cannot be fully explained by the physical brain. It must be an additional thing.”

“And you have encountered such beings?” Hume asks. “How did you ascertain their lack of inner experience?”

“Well, I don’t need to ascertain it,” the logician replies. “It is not a contradiction and so is a logical possibility. It is a metaphysical possibility, and that fact alone supports the dualist claim.”

Hume scans the room once again, hoping to find a bar he might have missed earlier, to no avail. “It seems,” he says slowly, “that you are imagining a world where inner consciousness is distinct from the physical brain in order to prove that inner consciousness is distinct from the physical brain. I am no expert in literature, but I wonder if fiction ought to avoid ontological claims.”

“Ah yes,” says the modal logician. “That’s because you are unclear about the rules of modal logic applied to metaphysical claims. You see, these are not real worlds but theoretical ones. A possible world is one that could exist in theory because it contains no logical contradiction.”

Hume thinks about it for a moment. “And you’re sure you’re not a novelist?” The logician blinks. “With all due respect,” says Hume, feeling he has fulfilled his duty of politeness in new company, “it is you, I suspect, who are unclear. About the rules of contradiction. Your poorly named philosophical zombie has a brain that is completely identical and yet does not fulfil the primary function of a brain. Is that not a contradiction? If there were a bar in this hall, I would pour you a whisky and ask you to conceive of a physically identical substance that does not get one drunk. You claim to know these zombies in the one arena in which we can never know anyone — their inner experience — and you assert that a brain without a mind is possible simply because you have said so. Does the word contradiction mean something different in these times?”

The logician is sulking. “You just don’t get modal forms. The logic is sound. Possible worlds show us what is logically coherent. What is logically coherent can reveal truths about what is actual.”

“I suspect,” Hume replies, “that you are mistaking the coherence of your ideas for the world beyond them. Logical consistency tells you only that your thoughts agree with one another — not that nature agrees with them.”

keynote address: We Solved Metaphysics. Rejoice!

A senior metaphysician, wearing a badge that reads Keynote Speaker: Modal Metaphysics, begins relentlessly tapping on a microphone. It is clear he will never stop until he has everybody’s undivided attention. He has solved metaphysics by proving the existence of God, and is in a hurry to tell everyone about it. Hume sees the words — shiny and silver against a dark plastic background — the combination of modal and metaphysics, and briefly entertains the notion that hell is real and that he should never have made fun of God’s creation.

“René Descartes once proposed a rudimentary ontological argument — a seventeenth-century update of the early and less sophisticated versions of Anselm and Aquinas. He claimed that it was greater to exist than not to exist, and therefore the concept of a perfect God must include existence as a necessary quality. With hindsight, of course, it is easy to criticise the great mind of Descartes as naïve, trapped in a medieval worldview where the evidence of science played no part in metaphysical speculation. And now, with the tools of modal necessity, we have constructed an ontological argument that finally works. Kant said that existence is not a predicate. Well, we say: so what? We do not need it to be one.”

Hume would like to go home, but he is transfixed, like a motorist who, upon encountering an accident on the road, forgets his urgency to be somewhere else, and cannot help but slow down to witness the tragedy unfolding.

The keynote speaker continues, oblivious to the darkened brow of the Scottish empiricist. “Anselm said God was greater than that which could be conceived. Descartes refined the notion to a being with all perfections, including existence. And now we have the maximally great being and the final proof of the existence of God. The long journey has reached its fruition. We philosophers have renounced metaphysical speculation to concern ourselves only with what is logically conceivable. We define God as the maximally great being. We see no logical contradiction and so understand that the maximally great being exists in at least one possible world. We know that the definition of a maximally great being includes that he could never be limited to merely one possible world, or even a million of them, but must exist in all of them to be maximally great. To exist in all possible worlds is to also exist in this one. Rejoice, for we have found salvation through logic!”

The End of the Worlds

Hume had raised his hand at “metaphysical speculation,” but to no avail. He had begun his journey to the podium at the proclamation that a maximally great being must exist in at least one possible world, and now, as the hall erupted — not in unified cheers, but in a chaotic mixture of applause, objections, hurried scribbling, and at least one person shouting that this contradicted S5 — he was

calmly ascending to the stage. The keynote stepped aside, confident that his position was unassailable.

“The progress of the sciences must be truly remarkable in this world,” Hume begins, “that you know precisely how a universe comes into being.” He looks compassionately at the keynote speaker, who is now studying his fingernails with forensic intensity. “You do know how a universe begins, I presume. You understand how matter forms, where it originates, the forces that propel time and space into existence?” The modal metaphysician does not react.

“Your silence suggests you are yet to penetrate such mysteries.” A few eyebrows twitch. Hume continues, serene and unhurried: “On what basis, then, do you claim it is conceivable that a maximally great being can create the universe in any possible world when you do not know what it is for a universe to begin? I grant that if he created it in one, then he would create it in all — but is that not precisely what is under scrutiny? In conceiving it, you assume the very outcome you seek to prove.”

The keynote speaker lets out a small, dignified sob. It pierces the room like a dropped pin in a cathedral. Hume softens slightly, ever the compassionate sceptic. “For my part, I can easily conceive of a universe springing into existence by the same randomness and absurdity that fuel our lives. So tell me this: if I may conceive of a possible world where no maximally great being creates the universe, then surely such a being cannot create it in any, or he would not be maximally great.”

The modal logician is crying now. Everyone else is looking at their fingernails.

“Philosophy must always begin with human experience,” he says. “When you leave experience, you do not enter metaphysics — you enter fiction.”

“These admirable gentlemen believe that because one can imagine a thing, that thing belongs to the furniture of the universe. This is not philosophy. This is a game of words. Imagination is a delightful talent. It entertains the young, enriches literature, and fills the idle hours of the retired. But let us be clear: imagination is not ontology. It reveals what the mind can picture — not what the world contains.”

A taut silence follows.

“If conceivability were the measure of reality,” Hume continues, “we would have dragons in Parliament, angels lecturing metaphysics, and zombies collecting stipends.” He taps the lectern.

“Possibility requires evidence. Conceivability requires only a mind with too much time on its hands.” Even the S5 maximalists stop writing.

“You have built an empire of castles in the air. Your foundations are definitions; your materials are symbols; your results are imagined certainty drawn from non-existent worlds. You have lost contact with the world you seek to represent. Imagined worlds can be entertaining, but they are not evidence — and treating conceivability as reality is the very mistake philosophy exists to avoid.” He pauses, then delivers the killer blow:

“You have mistaken the limits of language for the structure of reality, and the structure of your imagination for the limits of possibility.” The modal logicians look wounded. Hume softens.“Return to experience. There is more knowledge in a single well-constructed experiment than in a thousand of these possible worlds.”

The Call of Home and Experience

Through tear-filled eyes some swear they saw a white light envelop the great David Hume, and just as mysteriously as he arrived, He vanishes. A number of them spend the next six weeks writing papers insisting that his disappearance was epistemically possible, metaphysically contingent, nomologically indeterminate, and “in no way a counterexample to S5, whatever Professor Williamson might have to say about it”

One particularly enthusiastic graduate student claims that Hume’s exit demonstrates a new kind of modality: vanishingness. His supervisor approves the proposal and secures a research grant.

The truth was much simpler: Hume went home. He had work to do. He returned to his own century, where metaphysics still wandered in circles — but at least those circles were shrinking, drawn ever closer to experience. What he had seen in the future chilled him to the bone: a reanimated metaphysics, resurrected through ingenuity and protected by logic; adrift among imagined worlds, speaking with the confidence of theologians who believe they’ve discovered a new scripture — the modal proof. He had witnessed rationalism at its furthest extreme: a metaphysics not merely indifferent to experience, but proud of the distance. He went home to sharpen the empiricist axe.

Afterword: The Metaphysics of Imagined Worlds

What the modal logicians in this story represent is not a caricature but a genuine drift within contemporary analytic metaphysics: the belief that by analysing what can be conceived within a formal logical framework, we can thereby discover truths about what is real. The result is a metaphysics increasingly proud of its distance from the empirical world. Possible-world semantics becomes a permission slip for imagination to masquerade as ontology.

Hume’s appearance here is not simply a comic device. It reminds us of the tension at the heart of philosophy since the seventeenth century: whether reason should lead or follow experience. Descartes — under pressure of censorship — built a philosophical architecture that granted speculative reason temporary permission to rule, justified by theological guarantees. Centuries later, the structure remains, but the original justification does not. The old armour has become a new orthodoxy: metaphysics liberated from evidence.

The modal ontologist insists that if something can be “consciously conceived without contradiction,” then it is metaphysically possible — and perhaps, with enough modal machinery, metaphysically necessary. But this elevates the combinatorial powers of thought above the constraints of nature. Logical coherence is not a test for reality. Thought experiments do not count as data. Conceivability is a psychological threshold, not an epistemic one.

Hume’s return to empiricism in this story is a call to remember philosophy’s task: to explain the world we actually inhabit. Imagined universes can be delightful and illuminating, but they do not

replace engagement with the one that contains us. If philosophers lose contact with experience, they do not transcend confusion — they systematise it.

Philosophy should remain bold and inventive. But its inventiveness must remain answerable to the world. When imagination becomes ontology, and possibility eclipses evidence, the discipline risks becoming — as Hume feared — nothing more than a game of words played very seriously. The empiricist axe remains sharp for a reason.